DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 296 211 CG 020 901

AUTHOR Evans, Ellis D.; Warren-Sohlberg, Luann
TITLE A Pattern Analysis of Adolescent Abusive Behavior toward Parents.
PUB DATE 87
NOTE 47p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescents; Aggression; Behavior Patterns; Conflict; *Family Violence; Intervention; Mothers; *Parent Child Relationship; *Parents; *Police; Sons; *Trend Analysis

ABSTRACT

Recently, awareness of abuse of parents by their adolescent offspring has increased. Research has not addressed the issue of police involvement in adolescent to parent abuse, even though people in law enforcement have become increasingly involved in mediating family disputes and applying sanctions against abuse activity. This study analyzed police case reports (N=73) of formal complaints about adolescent aggression toward parents to answer questions about identity of complainant, gender relationships in patterns of parental abuse, age trends in assaultive behavior, reasons for adolescent-parent disputes that precipitate violence, types of violence expressed by adolescents toward their parents, and police resolution of these domestic abuse incidents. Results showed a strong modal pattern of male adolescent-to-mother abuse associated largely with conflicts about home responsibilities, money, and privilege. Results are related to similar studies based solely on adolescent self-report or survey methods and are interpreted in the context of adolescent stress and conflict theory. (Author/ABL)

**********
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
**********

ED296211



# A Pattern Analysis of Adolescent Abusive Behavior Toward Parents

Ellis D. Evans and Luann Warren-Sohlberg

University of Washington

College of Education

CG 020901

Running Head: Adolescent Violence Toward Parents

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Ellis D. Evans

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Abstract

Police case reports of formal complaints about adolescent aggression toward their parents were analyzed to answer questions about identity of complainant, gender relationships in patterns of parental abuse, age trends in assaultive behavior, reasons for adolescent-parent disputes that precipitate violence, types of violence expressed by adolescents toward their parents, and police resolution of these domestic abuse incidents. A strong modal pattern of male adolescent-to-mother abuse associated largely with conflicts about home responsibilities, money, and privilege was revealed. Results are related to similar studies based solely on adolescent self-report or survey methods and are interpreted in the context of adolescent stress and family conflict theory.

# A Pattern Analysis of Adolescent Abusive Behavior Toward Parents

A startling literature on domestic violence reveals that physical and psychological abuse in American homes has reached intolerable proportions (Wolfe, 1985). Straus, Gelles, and Steinmetz (1980), for example, provide reasoned estimates that roughly half of all American households are marred by family violence at least once a year. Most of the family violence literature has concerned parental child abuse and various forms of spouse abuse (Wolfe, 1985). More recently, however, awareness of abusive relations among other family members has increased, notably the abuse of parents by their adolescent offspring. Straus et al. estimate that one in every five children strikes a parent each year, with one in ten using a method of violence that carries a high risk of parental injury. Wider ranging surveys (e.g., U.S. Department of Justice, 1980) suggest equally dramatic figures, coupled with the observation that more than half of all cases of parental abuse do not even come to the attention of law authorities. Such estimates sound a clarion call for research to clarify and seek better understanding of adolescent violence toward parents. To date, however, few enlightening studies about this disturbing phenomenon have appeared in the published literature. Excepting an occasional report of clinical observations (e.g., Charles, 1986), these studies have relied

upon retrospective survey techniques, usually interviews or self-report questionnaires with all their attendant limitations (Cornell & Gelles, 1982; Kratcoski, 1985; Peek, Fisher, & Kidwell, 1985). Moreover, none of these studies has addressed the issue of police involvement in adolescent to parent abuse, even though people in law enforcement have become increasingly involved in mediating family disputes and applying sanctions against abuse activity (Bard, 1980).

The police intervention issue is problematical in view of a long tradition of rights to privacy and self-determination in American family life. Significantly, however, police discretion seems to figure strongly in the resolution of cases involving adolescents who assault their parents. In Washington State, for example, police action for adult-instigated domestic violence is mandated by law. Arrests are obligatory in most instances. Less so for domestic violence instituted by children or adolescents under 18 years of age. Excepting felonious assault (assault with a weapon and/or inflicting serious injury), police have wide discretionary power to determine a course of action for instances of adolescent parental abuse. To our knowledge, however, no data about police resolution of adolescent-to-parent violence have surfaced in the psychological literature to illuminate this aspect of the problem.

With these observations in mind, a study was undertaken to

examine cases of adolescent to parent abuse and their resolution by reference to actual police records. Unlike data from retrospective research methods, these case records document actual complaints about adolescent violence toward parents via on-site investigation by trained law officers. This procedure provides an advantage of data validity over post hoc self-report methods. Moreover, as Strasburg (19878) has observed, self-report data dc not always agree with arrest-based data which usually show higher reliability for the behavior of more violent delinquents who come to police attention. In addition to their methodological advantage, police repo t data can be useful as an empirical benchmark against which to compare any emerging patterns of adolescent violence toward parents suggested by survey research. Any such patterns would seem appropriate for theoretical interpretation, especially in regard to parent-adolescent conflict and adolescent aggression (Grotevant & Cooper, 1983; Keith, 1984). Taking a longer term perspective, evidence from this line of research also may generate implications for parent education and youth service workers.

Regarding theoretical perspective, stress theory and social learning concepts provide potentially viable accounts of adolescent abusive behavior. Anna Freud (1969), for example, points to an expected transitional stage of upset between the comparatively coherent and stable period of childhood and adult

achievement of self-governance. As a transitional stage, adolescence is seen as a time of inevitable developmental disturbance. Major alterations in drives (including aggression) and object (personal) relations are identified as principal sources of psychobiological stress. These alterations are thought to underlie a variety of destabilizing modes of adolescent response to parents ranging from mild indifference, through passive aggression, to active rebellion or revolt. Some degree of embattled adolescent-parent relationship is seen as inevitable during the adolescents' transitional stage. But open revolt extending to physical assaults on a parent would represent the extreme pattern and likely to be predisposed by relationship problems during the childhood years. Relationship problems characterized by hostile dependency, extrinsic valuation, and autocratic control figure strongly in viewing adolescent aggression as a reaction to intolerable stress.

Further relevant to the issue of adolescent abusive behavior are recent interpretations of aggression as early socialization failure that emphasize principles of behavioral and social-cognitive learning theory (Snyder & Patterson, 1987). Parental affect expression and management style as conditions for the adolescent's observational learning, reinforcement, and punishment experiences are important here. Family patterns of lax or enmeshed disciplinary practices, especially in a context

of low acceptance or rejection, mark troubled grounds for socialization of the child and adolescent. Simply put, aggression toward others, including parents, by adolescents is seen as learned behavior. Tendencies for such behavior may be further exacerbated by family structural characteristics (e.g., single parenthood, sibling spacings, family size) that affect the amount of personal contact and parental supervision, as well as idiosyncratic personal variables (e.g., low resilience) and weak family support networks that extend beyond the home (Anthony, 1987; Sameroff & Seifer, 1983).

In sum, a rich complex of ideas from psychosocial theory provides a backdrop against which to interpret data about adolescent aggression and abusive family relationships. With this backdrop in mind, it was anticipated that police report data could be tested for reasoned inference about the conditions of adolescent-to-parent abuse.

## Method

Consistent with official law enforcement policy in the community under study, domestic violence was defined for this research as the actual or threatened use of force by one family member toward another. Using this definition, formal police records of all nonhomocidal domestic violence incidents reported in a largely middle-class city (1987 population: 82,070) in Western Washington State during the period from November 1984 to

March 1987 were screened for cases involving adolescents aged 12 to 17 years. Justification for the lower age marker stems from Washington State law which holds age 12 as the onset of personal accountability. Once age 18 is reached, a criminal suspect is liable for prosecution as an adult.

From a larger pool of domestic violence cases (N=1384) reported during the same period, all incidents involving an adolescent as the primary or mutual aggressor against a parent were selected for analysis. Primary aggressor cases were those in which the adolescent was determined by the reporting officer(s) to have initiated violence against a parent. Mutual violence cases were those in which the responding officer(s) reported reciprocal aggression between adolescent and parent. Unlike cases of primary aggression, mutual aggression was determined when neither a precipitating event nor an antagonist's testimony were sufficiently clear to identify the originator of violence. No cases involving a parent as the primary aggressor were included in this analysis.

Screening yielded 65 cases of adolescent to parent violence representing 61 separate family units. Subsequently, eight cases involving 18-year-old subjects living as dependents in eight different parental homes were added, thus increasing the sample to a total of 73 cases. Inspection of identifying data from police reports indicated that these eight cases had demographic

profiles similar to the original 65 cases, hence their addition to enlarge the total sample.

Once identified, all cases were analyzed for common components according to police department criteria for domestic violence incidents in general. These criteria include family background factors, age and gender of parties involved, relationship between the antagonists, initiator of police complaint, circumstances of the incident, and resolution of the case. Resultant data were then categorized for presentation in descriptive form suitable for comparison to related studies about adolescent to parent violence based upon interview and questionnaire methods.

In addition to the objective data base, information interviews were conducted with police officers who regularly respond to complaints of domestic violence in the target community. The purpose of these interviews was to explore officer perceptions and sentiments about the domestic violence problem, especially as it involves adolescents.

## Results

Results may be interpreted more meaningfully by first considering some family status variables. For one thing, the sample revealed 54% intact and 46% single-parent families. This comparatively high percentage of single-parent family representation contrasts with 1980 census data from the target

community showing that, of all homes with children, 83% were headed by couples and 17% by single parents. For another, the family racial-ethnic data sample revealed a distribution of 89% Caucasian and 11% minority group (mostly Black). This configuration is somewhat disproportionate to the target community as a whole, as 1980 census data revealed that only 8.6% of the total population was composed of ethnic minorities. Still another notable sample characteristic is that the mean ages for adolescents and parents involved in family violence were 15.7 years and 36.0 years. Finally, it is important to note in advance that over 80% of the cases involved an adolescent as a primary aggressor.

Having established these contextual characteristics, six substantive findings follow, with accompanying figures for illustrative purpose. First, as shown in Figure 1, data revealed that an overwhelming majority of requests for police assistance was initiated by parents (77%), followed by adolescents themselves (9%, exclusively mutual aggression cases), relatives (7%), and others (7%, usually a neighbor). This comparatively minor role of neighbors and other witnesses in reports of adolescent to parent violence stands in contrast to spouse and parent to child abuse cases in the same target community where non-relatives have been much more likely to initiate a complaint (18.1%) (Warren-Sohlberg, 1988).

---

Insert Figure 1 about here

---

Second, aggressor-victim data indicated a strong modal pattern in terms of violence toward parents by adolescent males (65.7% of cases) as indicated by Figure 2. For this majority of cases, the data show that mothers are three times as likely to be abused as are fathers. But adolescent females were strongly implicated in family violence as well (34.3% of cases), nearly exclusively being aggressive against mothers (32.9%) rather than against fathers (1.4%).

---

Insert Figure 2 about here

---

Figure 3 supports a third important finding--namely, a nearly linear relationship between age of the aggressive adolescent and number of reported verbal or physical assaults on parents. A majority of cases ( N = 43, 60.%) was accounted for by the 15-17 age group. Further notable in this connection is that a sizable number of adolescent aggressors (36%) revealed a record of prior delinquency, as determined by official police reports. An additional minority (29%) had come to the attention of one or another community social services agencies in the past as well. Thus, two-thirds of this sample of adolescent aggressors showed

some history of contact with law enforcement and/or social services (especially mental health counseling services). Perhaps even more telling is that police interrogation data in case reports uncovered scattered evidence of past domestic violence in 52% of families in this sample.

---

Insert Figure 3 about here

---

A fourth major finding concerns reasons stated by antagonists for the dispute that precipitated the incidents of primary or mutual aggression. Those reasons are shown by Figure 4 in order of descending frequency: home-related problems, money and spending behavior, alcohol and drug use, sexuality, conflict about friends, school issues, and miscellaneous others. Related evidence suggests that reasons for dispute may vary somewhat according to relationship patterns. For example, all disputes involving sexuality involved arguments or conflict between daughters and their mothers. This finding calls attention to a persistent dynamic in maternal-adolescent female relations (Bell & Buerkle, 1961), and suggests that the traditional double standard about adolescent sexuality still thrives to some degree (Bell, 1966; Gordon & Gilgun, 1987). Otherwise, reasons for dispute were distributed about equally across age and gender relationships with some tendency for money and alcohol disputes

to occur more often among adolescent males than among their female counterparts.

---

Insert Figure 4 about here

---

It is notable that the largest category of reasons, "Home Life," encompasses a wide variety of conflicts ranging from sibling fights and disagreement about home responsibilities and privileges (e.g., room cleaning and television watching), through transportation problems (e.g., rides to a shopping arcade), to sibling fights and threats to run away from home.[1] Money conflicts composed the second-ranked category of reasons (e.g., allowances and spending patterns). Alcohol or other drug use was cited as a direct cause of dispute in 19% of the cases (N = 14) and constituted the third-ranked category. Alcohol was further implicated in nine additional cases as indicated by notations of "HDB" (had been drinking) on the police report forms. This means that the alcohol issue was documented in nearly one-third (31.5%) of the incidents investigated by police.

Fifth, some measure of the seriousness of the family violence problem is conveyed by Figure 5 which indicates type of violence expressed by adolescents toward their parents. As can be seen from this figure, a majority of aggressive incidents in this sample (56%) involved actual physical assaults on the parent,

usually by an adolescent male. An additional 16% of cases involved a threat to use a weapon, most commonly a knife, but also including objects such as a golf club or baseball bat. In no case was a firearm involved. Moreover, in cases of mutual violence, no parent used or threatened use of a weapon. "Verbal only" threats of assault were somewhat more likely to occur among adolescent females and typically involved cursing or name-calling. The few cases of violence displaced to property, exclusively by males, included kicking or breaking furniture, punching holes in a wall of the home, and throwing breakable objects. Further analysis of types of violence in terms of gender relationships again indicated the prevalence of aggression toward mothers, across all four categories of violence. No cases resulted in hospitalization of subjects, although victimized parents occasionally complained of bruises, soreness, or a bloody nose or lip. One case involving a minor cut required medical attention.

---

Insert Figure 5 about here

---

A sixth and final major finding reported here is illustrated in Figure 6 which contains information about resolution or disposition of the family violence incidents. Slightly over one-half of these incidents were resolved at the time of police

officer investigation by one of three removal strategies: arrest of the adolescent aggressor (34%), transportation by police car to the home of a friend (no arrest) (9%), or immediate placement in a child protective services facility (7%). Other crisis resolution modes included counseling (19%), sundry referrals (15%), or "no action" (15%). Of particular interest were adolescents who were arrested (N = 25). Of these aggressors, most were males (80%) who had been physically violent toward their mothers or had threatened violence with a weapon. Thirteen of these adolescent males (52%) had prior police records and seven (28%) had more than one prior offense. Of the total number of arrestees, nine (36%) had a record of past psychological counseling as well. Ten of the adolescents arrested (40%) showed a history of both counseling and delinquent offense. In general, arrestees were concentrated in the upper age range (15-18 years).

---

Insert Figure 6 about here

---

Arrests typically resulted in placing the offending adolescent in custody, but releasing him or her within four hours. Thereafter, the adolescent was sent home with a juvenile arrest notice to the parents with instructions to contact a detective within 72 hours regarding disposition of the case. Cases of aggravated assault were rarely referred to juvenile

court. More typically, a diversion procedure was activated to result in nominal punishment (e.g., eight hours of community service) and two hours of anger management counseling. Thereafter, a diversion agreement was enacted to include a behavioral contract with parents and periodic monitoring by a juvenile probabion officer. In the community under study, a repeat offense by an adolescent triggers further accountability, and if felonious assault is involved, an offender over 16½ years of age may be charged as an adult.

As for the more clinical aspect of this study, informal follow-up interviews with police officers responsible for these family violence reports resulted in three main observations. First, most officers expressed a distaste for domestic violence calls. They seemed generally apprehensive about what they consider an invasion of family privacy and somewhat resentful at having to exercise the authority of the law in situations where they expect parents should be able to manage their problems but have "failed" in their child-rearing responsibilities. Second, as a group these officers expressed frustration about being insufficiently trained to mediate parent-adolescent disputes and ambivalence about integrating family crisis mediation into their role responsibilities. Finally, these officers generally saw most family violence calls as being much less serious than other "more pressing" criminal activities in their community that require forceful police action.

## Discussion

Taken together, the foregoing results suggest a modal pattern of problematical family relations as follows: A conflict between an adolescent, usually male aged 15-17, and a parent, usually the mother, involving disputes about home care responsibilities and/or money--occasionally complicated by alcohol use and some history of prior social disturbance. The dispute culminates in physical aggression toward the parent, who responds by calling for police assistance, resulting in arrest or, more often, some form of mediation or referral action by the attending officers to separate the adolescent and parent. This modal pattern should not be taken to obscure the abuse behavior of adolescent females in this sample or the fact that aggression is necessarily unreciprocated by a parent. Yet the data, more often than not, fit consistently with related research findings and provide an anchor point from which to discuss variations on the theme of abusive family relations involving adolescents. Accordingly, this section is provided to both elaborate on the major results and couch applicable results in theoretical perspective.

To begin, it is notable that the number of adolescent-to-parent abuse reports (N = 73) was a relatively small percentage (5.2%) of the total number of domestic violence reports of record (N = 1384) for the 2½-year period of this study. It cannot be determined, of course, how many abuse incidents involving

adolescent aggression went unreported over that period of time. But these data closely resemble estimates from the 1980 U.S. Department of Justice study (1980) in which 47,000 of 1.2 million cases of family violence (or 3.9%), involved a child's violent behavior toward parents. Moreover, the 1980 survey suggested that, overall, more than half of domestic violence incidents were never reported to the police. Thus, while the ratio of adolescent aggressive episodes to parent and spouse aggression episodes may remain small, the absolute number of actual abuse cases is cause for deep concern.

Beyond this statistical similarity of local data to national sample estimates, musings about major findings of the present study are in order. First, in view of perennial issues of adolescent autonomy, family interpersonal relations, and parental control, the incidence of parent complaints in abuse situations is not surprising. Adolescent aggression toward a parent is an explicit marker of power struggles in the authority relationship and a stark indicator of a threatened affectional relationship. Appeals to police intervention, although usually effective in solving the immediate problem (i.e., terminating aggression of the moment), are unlikely to endear parents to their children and may contribute further to a deteriorating family situation. If so, aftercare services seem warranted to preserve and perhaps restore some order to the situation. Services in the form of

court-ordered counseling for spouse abusers are currently being tested in the community under study with promising results (Warren-Sohlberg, 1988). But except for possible anger management coaching for arrested adolescents, aftercare services are not commonly prescribed for adolescents in serious disputes with their parents.

Second, the dominant pattern of mothers as recipients of abuse by their adolescent male offspring requires comment. In part, this pattern may present statistical artifact because a disproportionate number of maternal single-parent households were represented in this sample. Where divorce or separation is responsible for single-parenting status, it is likely that conflicted or frustrated relationships were antecedent to the crisis of abuse. If so, one could speak of predisposing events in line with data about the apparent effects of divorce on adolescents (Montemayor, 1984) and the general relationship of family disorganization to delinquency rates for adolescents of both sexes (Strasburg, 1978).

This male-to-mother pattern of abuse also follows from the psychobiology of male aggression and delinquency (Farrington, 1987) and by implication from the parent-child socialization literature (Bronfenbrenner, 1961; Martin, 1982). A trend toward increasing involvement by mothers as a primary disciplinary agent coupled with the traditionally greater volume of mother-child as

compared to father-child interaction establishes a condition for higher probabilities of conflict and aggressive acting-out among adolescent males. This point is highlighted in Patterson's (1980) synthesis of data from distressed families on interactions between mothers and their young children. These data show higher rates of coerciveness for mothers of aggressive (versus nonaggressive) children, increased demands on mothers (not fathers) for crisis management, and higher probabilities for noncompliance and negativism among children responding to maternal influence attempts. More broadly, Montemayor and Hanson (1985) have also shown from the self-report data of tenth-grade students of both sexes that adolescent-parent arguments are significantly more frequent with mother (vs. father) in the normal course of daily living.

Insofar as abuse patterns are concerned, further insight into cross-gender adolescent-parent relationships awaits further research. It is possible that because of role proscriptions or other constraints, adolescent males are less likely to self-report abusive acts toward their mothers than toward their fathers. If so, evidence based upon documented cases like the present study hold an advantage of data validity. Additional research is also needed to clarify the dynamics of female adolescent-to-parent abuse. Studies to data have focused largely on adolescent males; however, both the 1980 U.S. Department of

Justice survey and the present study give evidence of substantial, albeit lesser, female involvement in parent abuse. Charles (1986) provides informal self-report data from an adolescent population of 200 in-patient and 100 out-patient adolescents in the only other available study that examines gender differences in parent abuse. Approximately one-third of the abuse incidents reported by Charles involved adolescent females who tended to be younger, more frequently abusive, and more likely to use household items as weapons than did abusive adolescent males. Also in contrast to males, no mention of abusive behavior was included in referral reports (symptoms and complaints) preceding treatment of these adolescent females. It is instructive that the proportion of self-reported parental abuse by females, approximately one-third of recorded incidents in the Charles study, is nearly identical to that shown in the present study.

Even so, females may be somewhat overrepresented in the present study because of role perception phenomena. Aggressive acting-out has traditionally been less consistent with the female role. When female aggression occurs it may be perceived by parents as even more serious than male aggression, prompting drastic action such as notifying the police. Moreover, adolescent females tend to be more closely supervised by parents in certain areas--especially heterosexual relationships--than do

their male counterparts. This condition may increase risks for family conflict in today's context of earlier emancipation striving and sexual activity among adolescents of both sexes (Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986).

The extent to which parents are more or less likely to excuse or dismiss female aggressiveness of the type noted in this study remains an objective for further inquiry. Meanwhile, a broader issue piqued by female presence in this study concerns a widely debated trend for increased delinquency rates among young women in general. According to Strasburg's (1978) review, this alleged trend became prominent in the early 1970s, as indexed by arrest rates including both simple and aggravated assault by adolescent females. Strasburg's own data from official delinquency records in the metropolitan New York area indicated that 20% of violent offenses committed by children and adolescents aged 8-17 years involved females. Again, noting that about 34% of the parent abuse incidents in the present study involved females, it is tempting to frame this finding with the similar finding from Charles to suggest documentation of a continual trend in female violence. Because isolated smaller-scale studies are inherently limited for any trend analysis, the need for continued research of this type is clear.

A third finding, the strong linear relationship between age of adolescent and frequency of abuse incidents, is revealing in

several ways. By implication, this relationship suggests an increasing susceptibility to problems of parental control as adolescents mature physically and proceed with the individuation process. As noted earlier, means for this process can range from adolescent indifference toward parents, through isolation from and disparagement of parents, to less typical assaultive behavior. Unfortunately, the present police data do not include information about pre-existing adolescent-parent relationships or any family history of behavior management strategies. This lack precludes a reasoned estimate about the extent to which some adolescent abusive behavior is a foremost reaction to intolerable parenting (Redl, 1966).

Regardless, the finding that a majority of parental abuse cases was represented by the 15-17 age group is consistent with empirical data concerning adolescent antisocial behavior (Gold & Petronio, 1980). These data show that acts of aggression and tendencies to engage in patterns of antisocial behavior begin to peak at about age 15 in U.S. culture, with gradual declines thereafter through the teenage years and into young adulthood. This phase of adolescent development and behavior suggests a sensitive period for authority relations and the learning of prosocial, or at least nondestructive means for self-assertion, anger control, and conflict resolution. Data from this study underscore a need for attention to strategies for assisting

aggression-prone adolescents in self-control skills. But such assistance should be equally important for parents whose power style and behavioral management techniques may consistently provoke anger and confrontation in the family setting. Promising strategies for this purpose have been reported in the literature (e.g., Fiedler & Ecton, 1986; Goldstein & Keller, 1987), although the practical problems of family intervention are enormous.

Applications of these strategies are likely to be most successful when prevailing sources of affective stress reactions are recognized. In the present context, this point can be linked to the fourth major finding--that is, stated reasons for parent-adolescent conflict. It will be recalled that home care responsibility and money problems, sometimes complicated by alcohol use, dominated this sample of adolescents and their parents. Very few reasons were explicitly school related, and all disputes about sexual behavior involved adolescent females and their mothers.

All told, these reasons are remarkably similar to those revealed by the aforementioned Montemayor and Hamlin study of ostensibly "normal" tenth graders. From this study it was clear that issues of interpersonal style (e.g., teasing, extending courtesies, rudeness, and various annoying behaviors) and rule enforcement (e.g., rules about home chore performances, dress standards, personal hygiene, use of personal and family property)

dominated most family arguments reported by these adolescents. Unlike the escalation to violence characteristic of the present sample, these tenth graders reported that withdrawal (e.g., ignoring the problem, changing the subject, walking away) was their most commonly utilized conflict resolution strategy.

From the present data, the extent cannot be determined to which withdrawal or other strategies (e.g., negotiation) may have occurred more or less often and ineffectively prior to violence. But it seems noteworthy that studies of youth violence toward parents cited earlier in this report have not dealt specifically with precipitating events or stated causes of abuse crises incidents. Thus, the disclosure of reasons for dispute represents a step forward in research of this kind, particularly in view of their relevance to the literature on adolescent psychology and life stress (Compas, Davis, Forsythe, & Wagner, 1987; Davis & Compas, 1986; Tyerman & Humphrey, 1983; Yeaworth, York, Hussey, Ingle, & Goodwin, 1980). This literature has addressed adolescent perceptions of stressful life events to reveal the salience of daily life tensions, including the frequency of "hassles" with parents and siblings, the press of unwanted household chores, problems with boyfriends or girlfriends, and so on. Coupled with developmental stressors common to all adolescents (e.g., pubertal changes and changes in adult expectations for adolescents) such tensions can increase

the likelihood of family conflict, especially when family cohesion and mutual support are low. Moreover, if the quality of an adolescent's general coping style is suspect, the stage may be further set for dispute and abuse scenarios such as those described herein.

Again, any speculative analysis cries for corroborating evidence from the individual families in abuse situations. Some credibility for such analysis comes from the fact that many primary aggressors in this sample gave evidence of prior behavior difficulties that are symptomatic of family disorganization.[2] The argument to account for parent abuse in the context of life stress and problematic family relationship systems (Tyerman & Humpherey, 1983) seems further reasonable in light of the alcohol-use factor revealed in this study. Recall that the alcohol use factor appeared in about one-fourth of the abuse incidents in this sample. As such, these data stand apart from most other adolescent-to-parent abuse studies. Excepting Kratcoski's (1985) study of delinquent youth, no mention of alcohol is made in related studies of adolescent-to-parent abuse based upon self-report method. Even in the Kratcoski study no direct evidence of alcohol use by adolescents is provided. Instead, reference is made to case files that often mention alcohol problems in low-functioning families of the delinquents. Considering that adolescent alcohol use problems are often

concealed and that problem denial is common among alcohol users (Johnson, 1982), self-report data may obscure the alcohol variable in parent abuse research. Regardless, possible alcohol problems should not be ignored in planning therapeutic strategies to benefit abuse-prone youths.

The fifth and sixth major findings of this study are suited to straightforward interpretation. Finding five concerns the type of abuse directed by adolescents to their parents, with type of abuse varying somewhat according to the gender of the abuser. It seems not surprising that actual physical assaults (shoving, slapping, kicking) are prevalent in this sample; one would expect incidents that provoke police complaints to represent rather serious threats to well-being. The relative absence of actual weapons (although not threat of weapon use) contrasts with implications from the Charles (1986) study that weapon use was common, especially among adolescent females. The near-absence of weapons in this sample also contrasts with the larger U.S. Department of Justice survey which indicated a better than 50% chance of weapon involvement in the event of a child-to-parent attack. This study also does not confirm estimates from the Department of Justice report about the high physical injury rates (48%) in estimates about child-to-parent violence. However, this study again underscores the persistent finding of more violent aggression to parents by adolescent males (Kratcoski, 1985). As

suggested earlier, reasons for such findings are debated. Authorities, however, generally concede that male aggression expresses an interaction of biological and psychosocial variables accented in cultures showing greater permissiveness of aggression among males (Keith, 1984).

The sixth and final finding discussed here--that concerning incident resolution--is somewhat tangential to issues of psychological theory. Recall that half of the reported incidents were resolved by direct police action: arrest, transportation to a friendly home, or temporary placement in a child protective services facility. Because only one-third of the cases resulted in arrests, it is tempting to reason that police are reluctant to take drastic steps in cases they perceive as insufficiently serious for arrest when police discretionary arrest is allowed by statute. Moreover, police interview data suggested a tendency for officers to perceive adolescent aggression as predictable oppositional behavior--i.e., resistance of parental attempts to restrict or punish their adolescent offspring. This tendency suggests a child advocacy bias at work among police officers involved in this study. Contrasting reports from elsewhere (e.g, Garbarino, 1980) suggest that legal authorities are more partial to parents whose adolescents, even if abused, receive attention from legal or judicial authorities by reason of their antisocial behavior.

Undoubtedly, social attitudes about adolescents and parent accountability vary to some extent by community, including law enforcers. Still, findings highlight a major controversy about police involvement in family disputes (U.S. Department of Justice, 1980). This controversy concerns whether to (a) arrest and perhaps charge an offender, whether or not a victim requests removal of the offender from the scene, or (b) ignore a victim's requests to remove an offender and view the abuse as a "family squabble" to be worked out. In addition to this strategy dilemma, police distaste for domestic violence may increase in proportion to the time and amount of complex paper work involved in processing the cases. To the credit of the police department and other agencies of the community represented in this study, procedures of "problem-oriented policing" (Eck & Spelman, 1986) for managing the local domestic violence problem are currently being evaluated (Warren-Sohlberg, 1988).

To conclude, data from police records of adolescent abusive behavior toward their parents support a modal pattern of male aggression toward mothers heading a single-parent family. Important variations include some incidence of female abusiveness and gender-related differences in types and stated reasons for adolescent-parent disputes. Results from this study simultaneously support and contradict findings from related studies which, on the whole, are insufficient to answer puzzling

questions about the causes and consequences of adolescent-to-parent abuse. However, by way of implication, this study reinforces self-report data from Kratcoski (1985) concerning the correlates of low family functioning and prior evidence of antisocial behavior in many cases of adolescent-to-parent abuse. This study departed from the more prevalent and convenient method of survey by self-report methods to contribute a more directly grounded data base for the purpose of knowing more about the reasons for and police resolution of family violence problems involving adolescents. Interpretations of the data presented here are derived largely from the broader literature on adolescent aggression, life stress, and conflicted parent-adolescent relationships.

(210)Z

References

Anthony, E. J. (1987). Risk, vulnerability, and resilience: An overview. In E. J. Anthony and B. J. Cohler (Eds.), The invulnerable child (pp. 3-48). New York: The Guilford Press.

Bard, M. (1980). Function of the police and justice system in family violence. In M. Green (Ed.), Violence and the family (pp. 105-120). Boulder, CO: Westview Press,

Bell, R. R. (1966). Parent-child conflict in sexual values. Journal of Social Times, 22, 34-44.

Bell, R. R., & Buerkle, J. V. (1961). Mother and daughter attitudes to premarital sexual behavior. Marriage and Family Living, 23, 390-392.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1961). The changing American child: A speculative analysis. Journal of Social Issues, 17, 6-18.

Charles, A. V. (1986). Physically abused parents. Journal of Family Violence, 1(4), 343-355.

Compas, R. E., Davis, G. E., Forsythe, C. J., & Wagner, B. M. (1987). Assessment of major and daily stressful events during adolescence: The adolescent perceived events scale. Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 55(4), 534-541.

Cornell, C. P., & Gelles, R. J. (1982, winter). Adolescent to parent violence. Urban and Social Change Review, 15, 8-14.

Davis, C. E., & Compas, B. E. (1986). Cognitive appraisal of major and daily stressful events during adolescence: a multidimensional scaling analysis. Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 15(5), 377-388.

Eck, J. E., & Spelman, W. (1987). Who ya gonna call? The police as problem-busters. Crime and Delinquency, 33(1), 31-52.

Farrington, D. P. (1987). Epidemiology. In H. C. Quay (Ed.), Handbook of Juvenile Delinquency (pp. 33-61). New York: Wiley-Interscience.

Feidler, E. L., & Ecton, R. B. (1986). Adolescent anger control: Cognitive-behavioral techniques. New York: Permagon Press.

Freud, A. (1969). Adolescence as a developmental disturbance. In G. Caplan and S. Lebouici (Eds.), Adolescence: Psychosocial perspectives (p. 5-10). New York: Basic Books.

Garbarino, J. (1980). Meeting the needs of mistreated youths. Social Work, 24, 122-126.

Gold, M., & Petronio, R. J. (1980). Delinquent behavior in adolescence. In J. Adelson (Ed.), Handbook of Adolescent Psychology (pp. 495-535). New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Goldstein, A. P., & Keller, H. (1987). Aggressive behavior: Assessment and intervention. New York: Permagon Press.

Gordon, S., & Gilgun, J. F. (1987). Adolescent sexuality. In V. B. Van Hasselt and M. Herson (Eds.), Handbook of Adolescent Psychology (pp. 147-167). New York: Permagon Press.

Grotevant, H. D., & Cooper, C. R. (Eds.). (1983). Adolescent development in the family. New Directions for Child Development, 22, 1-116.

Johnson, V. (1982). I'll quit tomorrow. New York: Harper and Row.

Keith, C. R. (Ed.). (1984). The aggressive adolescent: Clinical perspectives. New York: The Free Press.

Kratcoski, P. C. (1985). Youth violence directed toward significant others. Journal of Adolescence, 8, 145-157.

Martin, R. (1975). Parent-child relations. In F. D. Horowitz (Ed.), Review of child development research (vol. 4, pp. 463-540). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Montemayor, R. (1984). Picking up the pieces: The effects of parental divorce on adolescents with some suggestions for school-based intervention programs. Journal of Early Adolescence, 4(4), 289-314.

Montemayor, R., & Hanson, E. (1985). A naturalistic view of conflict between adolescents and their parents and siblings. Journal of Early Adolescence, 5(1), 23-30.

Patterson, G. R. (1980). Mothers: The unacknowledged victims. Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development, 45(5), Serial No. 186, 64 pp.

Peek, C. W., Fischer, J. L., & Kidwell, J. S. (1985, November). Teenage violence toward parents: Neglected dimensions of family violence. Journal of Marriage and the Family, pp. 1051-1058.

Redl, F. (1966). Our troubles with defiant youth. In F. Redl (Ed.), When we deal with children (pp. 409-417). New York: The Free Press.

Sameroff, A. J., & Seifer, R. (1983). Familial risk and child competence. Child Development, 54, 1254-1268.

Snyder, J., & Patterson, G. R. (1987). Family interaction and delinquent behavior. In H. C. Quay (Ed.), Handbook of Juvenile Delinquency (pp. 216-243). New York: Joseph Wiley and Sons.

Steinberg, L., & Silverberg, S. B. (1986). The vicissitudes of autonomy in early adolescence. Child Development, 57, 841-851.

Strasburg, P. A. (1978). Violent delinquents: A report to the Ford Foundation from the Vera Institute of Justice. New York: Monarch.

Straus, M. A., Gelles, R. J., & Steinmetz, S. K. (1980). Behind closed doors: Violence in the American family. New York: Doubleday.

Tyerman, A., & Humphrey, M. (1983). Life stress, family support, and adolescent disturbance. Journal of Adolescence, 6, 1-12.

U.S. Department of Justice. (1980). Intimate victims: A study of violence among parents and relatives. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Walker, B. (1978). Adolescent alcohol abuse: A review of the literature. Journal of Alcohol and Drug Education, 23(3), 51-65.

Warren-Sohlberg, L. (1988). Combatting domestic violence: Evaluating the impact of Bellevue's intervention program, University of Washington, College of Education, Seattle.

Wolfe, D. A. (1985). Child-abusive parents: An empirical review and analysis. Psychological Bulletin, 97(3), 462-482.

Yeaworth, R. C., York, J., Hussey, M. G., Ingle, M. E., & Goodwin, T. (1980). The development of an adolescent life change event scale. Adolescence, 15(57), 91-97.

## Footnotes

[1]See Appendix A for a full account of reasons for adolescent-parent dispute antecedent to violent incidents.

[2]Twenty-six of the adolescents in this sample (36%) had known prior juvenile records for one or more of the following offenses: shoplifting or possession of stolen property, minor in possession of drugs or alcohol, assault, reported as runaways, and unspecified other offenses.

## Appendix

### A Sampling of Precipatory Reasons for Dispute in Adolescent-to-Parent Abuse Incidents Drawn from Police Case Reports

The following items are taken from police case reports of domestic violence between adolescents and their parents. The total sample involved 73 incidents, but this sampling is intended only to illustrate the variety of disputes and actions in concrete terms.

Argument about messy room; adolescent male kicked parent in stomach.

Parent broke up sibling fight; adolescent male slapped parent.

Adolescent male held knife to parent to get a ride to local shopping center.

Parent read adolescent female's diary which contained threats of violence; adolescent objects and attacks parent with fists.

Argument about adolescent female's threat to run away from home; adolescent kicks and pushes parent.

Parent restricts adolescent male's television viewing; adolescent pummels parent.

Adolescent male argues with step-mother about being away from home too much; adolescent throws dog at step-mother.

FIGURE 1
IDENTITY OF COMPLAINANT TO POLICE
ABOUT ADOLESCENT-PARENT DISPUTE
(N = 73)

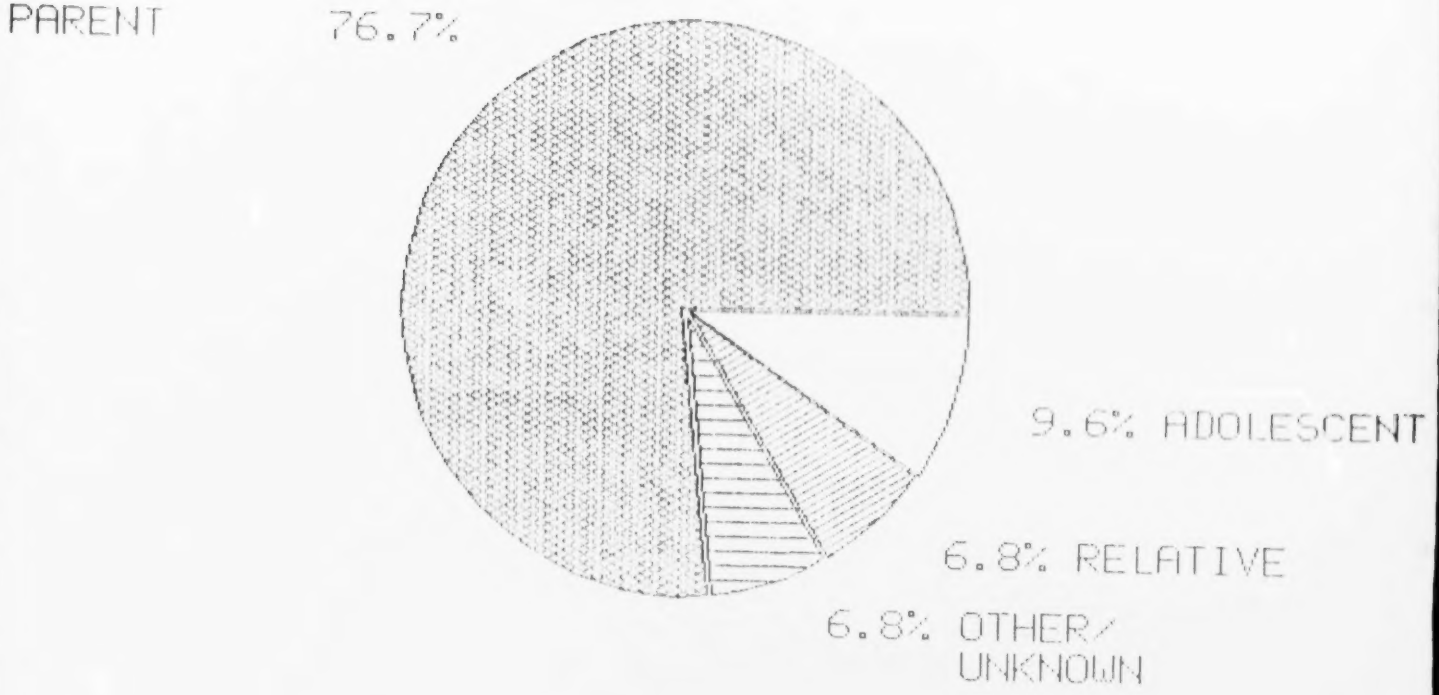

FIGURE 2
IDENTITY OF PARENT-ADOLESCENT
RELATIONSHIPS IN ADOLESCENT
TO PARENT ABUSE (N = 73)

FIGURE 3
RELATIONSHIP OF AGE OF ADOLESCENT
AGGRESSOR TO FREQUENCY OF ADOLESCENT
TO PARENT ABUSE INCIDENTS (N = 73)

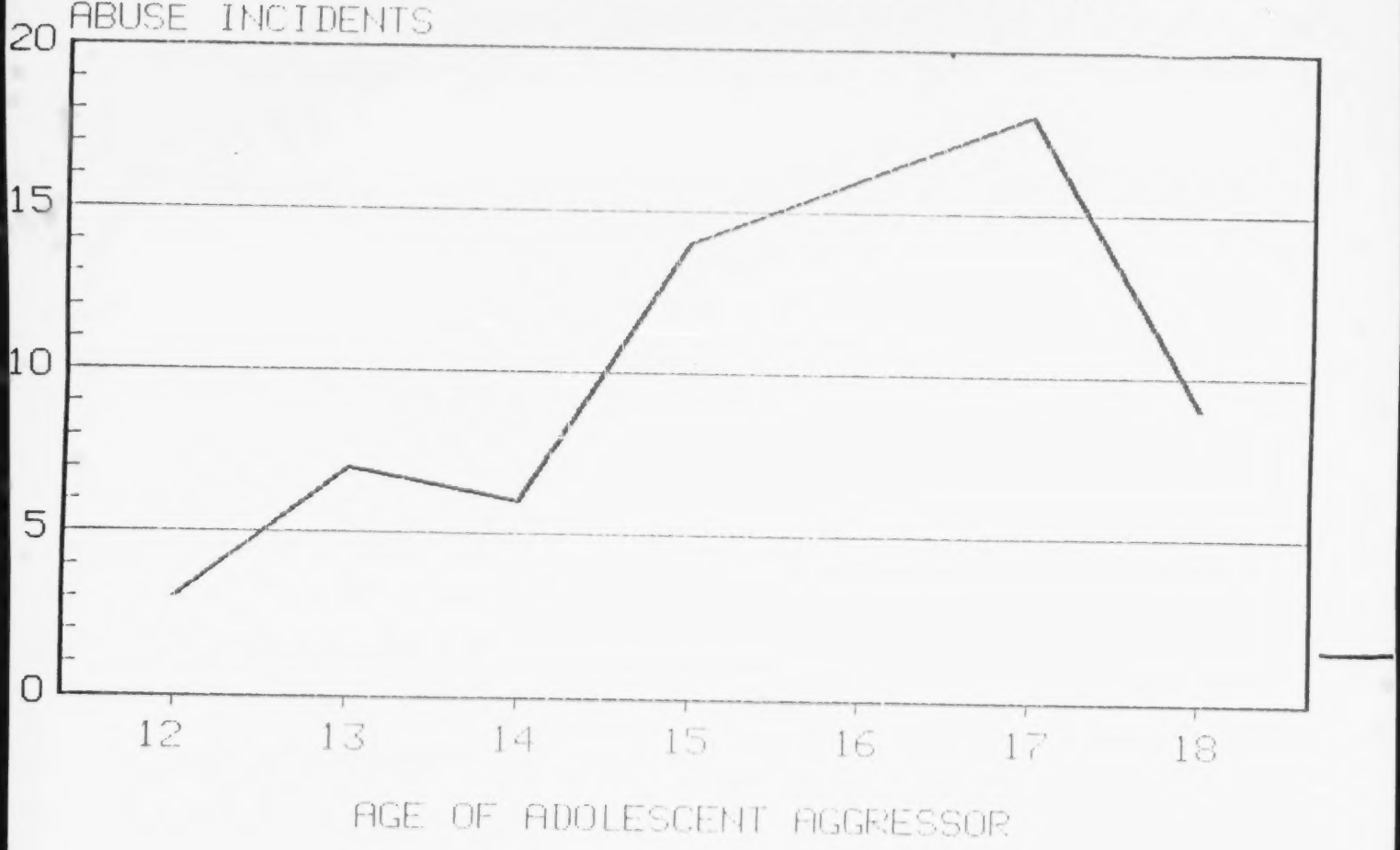

FIGURE 4
CATEGORIES OF REASONS FOR
ADOLESCENT-PARENT DISPUTES
ANTECEDENT TO ABUSE (N = 73)

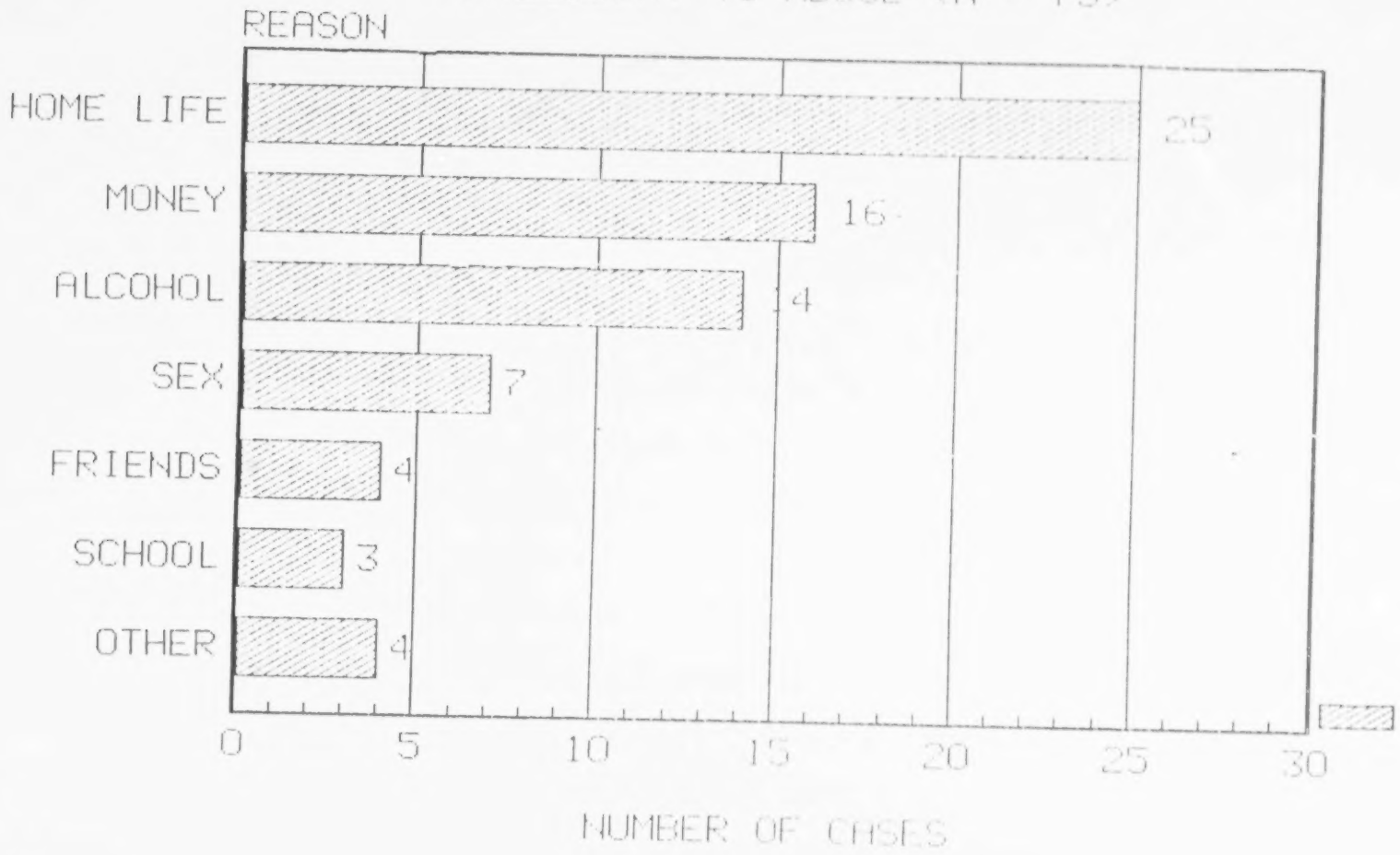

FIGURE 5
TYPE OF AGGRESSION EXPRESSED
BY ADOLESCENTS IN PARENT
ABUSE INCIDENTS (N = 73)

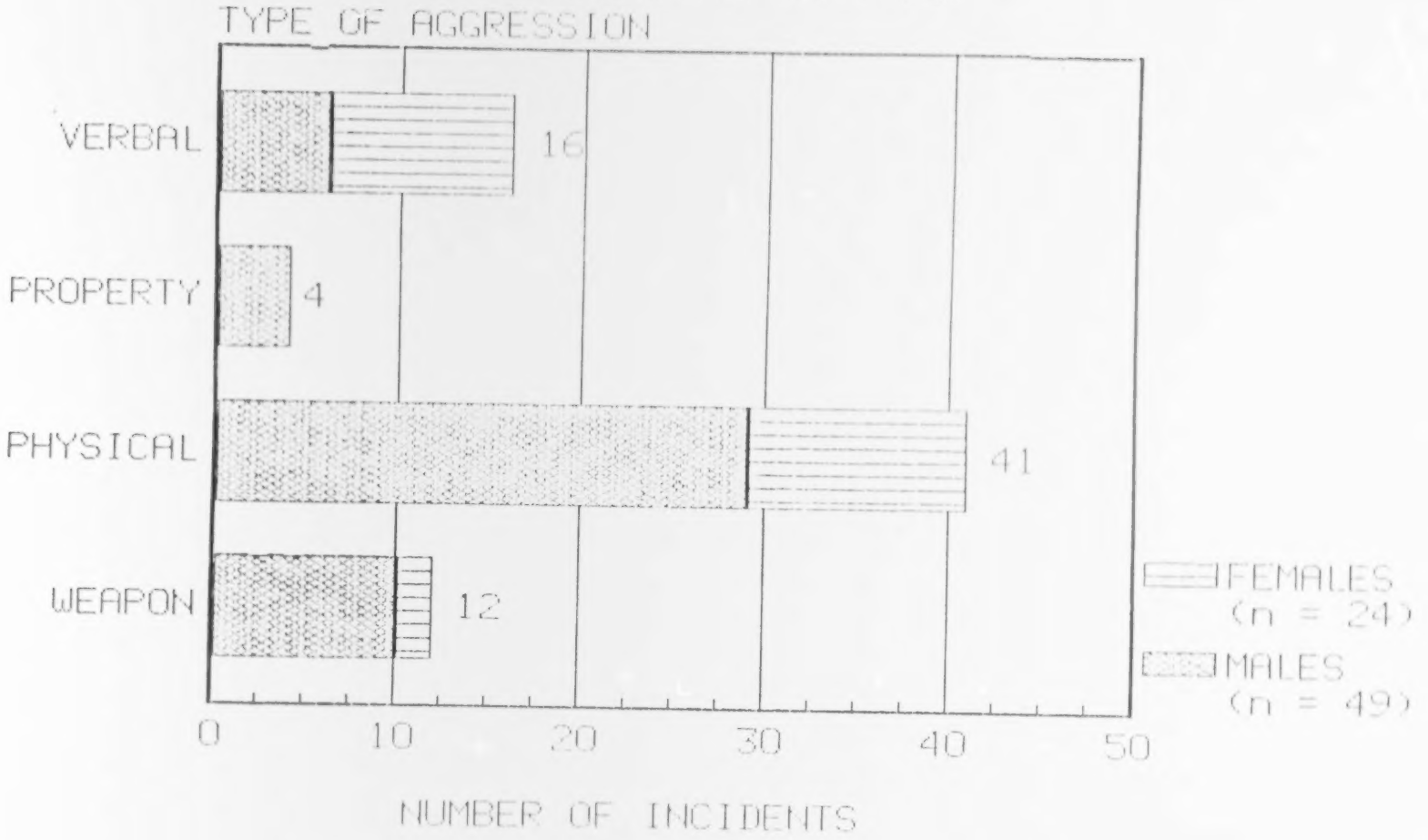

FIGURE 6
POLICE RESOLUTION OF
ADOLESCENT TO PARENT
INCIDENTS (N = 73)